

The Heart of Commitment
Lynda Sutherland
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Listen! The Spirit Is Calling! By John Saxon

Listen! Can you hear it? The Spirit is calling.

It calls us in the silence and through the noise and busyness of our daily lives. It calls us in the brightness of the day and the darkness of the night, in times of hope and despair.

Listen! Can you hear it? The Spirit is calling.

It doesn't matter what you call it for it has no name and has many different names. The Spirit of Life. The Spirit of Love. The Spirit of Compassion. The Spirit of Hope. The Spirit of Justice.

Listen! Can you hear it? The Spirit is calling.

It's calling to you and to me. It's calling us to greater wholeness, greater connection, greater service, greater love. It's calling us to heal the brokenness within ourselves, in others, and in the world. It's calling us to live more deeply. It's calling us to beauty.

It's calling us to laugh and dance and sing. It's calling us to live through life's pain and sorrow. It's calling us to live courageously and kindly, to speak our truth in love, and to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

It's calling us into community. It's calling us into the greater Life of all.

Listen!

Can you hear it?

The Spirit is calling.

[Silence]

Amen.

The Heart of Commitment

The UU Church of Reston, VA held its first ever Pride Festival last weekend. Rev. Debra W. Haffner, realizing there had never been such a thing in Reston, determined to host one at her church. 11 months of planning and chairing monthly meetings, 21 community organization cosponsors, 37 exhibitors, more than 30 performers were involved.

A community-wide corps of volunteers was recruited and organized. The folks involved in putting on our Memorial Day fair can understand the commitment involved in pulling something like this off! Over 1,100 people attended. Children, teens – lots of teens! – up to seniors came, excited and grateful to be seen, truly seen for who they are. The video showed a

wonderful variety of folks, an older woman in a wheelchair being pushed around the hall by a young man, maybe her son; a teen sporting a bandana and a pair of wings; a dad putting a pride sticker on the front-pack that held his tiny infant; so many happy, intense faces. One commenter on Debra's post remarked, "I can only imagine how much that meant to the folks who thought they'd never live to see the day when all of who they are could be not just tolerated but cherished."

There is a magic in that. A magic in seeing, and cherishing, and celebrating someone despite differences that may sometimes seem puzzling or perhaps off-putting. The magic that happens when suddenly someone is not *other*, but someone just like us. Someone whose struggles move us; someone we refuse to judge. This is the love that transforms culture.

In the cause of LGBT equality, we still have a lot of work to do; the upcoming ballot initiative to take away transgender rights – right here in progressive Massachusetts! – is proof of that. And this congregation, with its history of championing GLBT causes, has been and remains committed to pitch in on that work. But/and, I propose that the real work for us began in earnest years ago, when Dick and Janet Boutellier opened their home to the first gay-straight alliance meetings.

The ministerial search committee at the time was considering the application of a lesbian. Many folks were worried. I wasn't here then, of course, but I suspect the concerns were some of the typical fears folks experience when faced with new things they don't really understand. Will we attract gay people and by so doing, repel straight ones? Will we become a gay mecca? Will there be orgies? Will they recruit our children? Will we lose our long-time members?

Month by month, Janet and Dick hosted conversations. Information was gathered and shared with the congregation. The group worked to guide the congregation through the process of qualifying for the official Welcoming Congregation status with the UUA. And Rochelle became First Parish's first lesbian minister.

Did members leave? A few did. Did the church lose its appeal to straight people? Not at all. Did gay people join? Yes, indeed! And I think everyone here today would say that their presence has enriched our congregation in ways no one could have even foreseen. "They" are now fully and inextricably part of "us."

And this kind of patient, methodical, cultural shift, happening in churches, in schools, in communities, in places of employment, built a social climate where within a breathtakingly short time, marriage and workplace equality laws for gay and lesbian folk, and to a lesser degree transgender folk, could actually become the norm in large parts of our nation. Despite virulent pushback from a minority of vocal, determined folks, the majority of Americans now view LGBT people as fully human, fully deserving of every right and benefit offered to everyone else in our society.

Anthropologist Margaret Meade famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens are working across the country to change an unfair status quo in so many areas. Human rights for immigrants. A more just and equitable bail

bond system. A level playing field for differently-abled folk... A life of liberty and a deeper justice for people who look or talk or worship differently than we do, who are born into different circumstances, who have suffered setbacks in their lives or perhaps made mistakes, who find the deck stacked against them and barriers in the way of improving their lives.

Especially right now, this can feel like an uphill battle. There are so many things that need our attention! Do we work on LGBT rights? Black Lives Matter? Immigration reform? Environmental pollution? Green energy?

Do we feed people or work to get them decent wages so they can feed themselves? Do we protest and let ourselves maybe get arrested? Do we write our representatives and senators? Do we march in the Pride parade?

And what about educating ourselves on the issues? Getting to know people who are different, and listening to what they really want and need to happen? Sponsoring a young person to camp or to college? Raising healthy and aware children? Spending time with our families? Supporting the local library? Making ethical purchase choices?

What does our commitment to justice and equity and the worth and dignity of all people and the interdependent web of life call on us to do? Because for sure, we can't do it all.

A couple months ago, friend and colleague Sharon Welch called me, all excited. She was raised in a family dedicated to social justice, and she has felt this same dilemma. How does someone who cares about making a positive difference in the world, decide what is the most important thing or things they can spend their time and energy on? Sharon was excited because she has been researching for a new book on this very subject, and has found a body of research that says IT IS ALL EQUALLY USEFUL AND VITAL. Which means, whatever you feel you can do, whatever your passion leads you to support, it is important, and it is enough.

Are you committed to saving the environment? You can feel good about putting your whole heart into it! Don't let anyone tell you that is less important than getting big money out of politics.

Are you busy raising children, and your commitment right now is to their growth and development? Well, my friends, these are the concerned, committed citizens of our very near future, who will soon be the ones making change for the good. They deserve a whole-hearted effort on their behalf.

Are you committed to the work of First Parish, wanting this community to continue to live into its promise as a beacon on the hill, a place of liberal religion and enlightenment? Go ahead, put your heart into it! Our work, our community, our nurture of one another, are *important* in the world.

Whatever we feel called to do in the world, we were no doubt made for times like these. We each have a unique and indispensable role in making the world a better place, even if all we can do is offer a smile and a kind word to another. Who knows what a difference that might make in someone's life? Who knows what difference one life may make in the big scheme of things? We matter to one another, and to the world.

UU minister Barbara Rhode says,

I've always been more enchanted by the idea of *chosen* family. The thought that we are each making a choice to be here in this family, in this community, is powerful. We have actively chosen to come and be here. I'm not stuck with you because you're my cousin and I'm not allowed to be rude. I could leave if I wanted to, but I don't because of the way that we have each nurtured this community. I choose to be stuck with you, for better or for worse.

And we have continuously made this choice over and over again. Every time we attend worship, every time we donate our time and energy, every time we clasp hands in meditation is a promise: "I am here for you." The DNA of this community may be metaphorical, but it exists within me. My heart beats with the blood of this church, pounding out "I choose you, I am here." This is a safe space, a place of learning, a place of compassion, a space created by the very idea of love.

We make the choice to stay stuck together even when we don't even want to be in the same room. But we always come back to the table, because we choose to be together. Through thick and thin, we have chosen love. And in hard times, struggling times, times that we face everyday, we come together even closer. We make the choice to listen to each other, we make the choice to pick each other up, and we make the choice to love each other.

We have built this community with our commitment to that love. And together, we can

We all have many different reasons for being here, but I like to think that we all have one common reason for being here: Love. Over everything else, we are here because we are the people who choose love. We do not have a bloodline, but we have a deep unconditional love that runs through us all. We choose that love. We choose each other. Our hearts echo, "I choose you, I am here, I am here, I am here."

The Spirit is calling.

Calling us to greater wholeness, greater connection, greater service, greater love. Calling us to live more deeply, calling us to beauty.

The heart of our commitment – of any true commitment – is Love. May our love for one another be a strength and an anchor in the turbulent seas of adversity and change.

May it be ever so.